

A Year in Review: GOP vs Democratic Priorities

In 2015, I was honored to be sworn in as a member of the 102nd Wisconsin State Legislature.

But during the year, Wisconsin faced many challenges, and the legislature passed bills that should never even have been put to a vote -- bills that benefitted the very wealthy and that attacked the middle class, women, and some of our less fortunate neighbors.

Some of these bills were written outside Wisconsin by a large business-financed, right-wing group, the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC). ALEC gave our Republican colleagues their marching orders, and they were followed lock-step. One example: the so-called “right to work” law -- legislation that made it easier to cut wages, slash safety policies, and reduce the benefits workers earn and deserve. Similarly, the repeal of Wisconsin’s prevailing wage law will allow publically funded construction projects to pay workers less than their market value.

Significantly, this ALEC-driven agenda also targeted public education. Think about that: Other than protecting the lives, safety, and health of its citizens, our government has no program or activity that is more important. Education is the key to ensuring that every person can pursue her or his dreams and can gain economic security. Furthermore, public education is the glue of our democracy. Yet the complicit Republican majority and Governor -- over our objections -- continued the expansion of the private school voucher programs through the direct taking of scarce public tax monies *away* from our public schools, then used it to fund religious and other private schools. And, not satisfied with that assault on public education, they attacked and seriously crippled the entire University of Wisconsin System with massive slashes to its funding.

We Democrats in the Assembly pushed an agenda driven by our constituents’ interests – not by the size of out-of-state wallets. For example early this year, Assembly Democrats put forward the “15 for 2015” Economic Opportunity agenda. It would have created jobs, connected workers to available jobs, increased wages, and made Wisconsin more competitive in a global economy. And our “Bring Back the Middle Class” package would have increased retirement security and provided relief from high child-care costs and student debt. These efforts had broad support from our citizens and deserved legislative support as well.

Unfortunately, The Republican majority saw to it that none of our bills were allowed to have a vote on the merits in committee or even a public hearing. This shows disrespect for the citizens we represent, all the more so as gerrymandering may be the only reason the Republicans are in power.

The Republicans compounded this regrettable conduct with mean-spirited, divisive, and punitive laws and policies, such as ridiculous new restrictions on FoodShare; attempts to shame and humiliate transgender students in our schools; and constant attacks on women’s health. These Wisconsin Republicans are badly out of touch with the pressing needs of our state.

But despite the GOP’s anti-middle class agenda, My Democratic colleagues and I will continue to promote progressive, effective legislation, and to work every day to stand up not only for you but for all hardworking Wisconsinites. As one example, I am pleased to be soon introducing the Public School Reinvestment Act (PERA), a bill to bring money back into our public K-12 system and benefit *all* Wisconsin children.

Although 2015 has been a very disappointing and harmful year in the State Assembly, I am optimistic for better results in 2016 and will work as hard as I can to realize that goal.

Please accept my best wishes to you and your family for a healthy and happy New Year.